

ORPHANED COMPUTERS & GAME SYSTEMS

Volume II, Issue 2 February 1998

I guess I should admit that up to this point, my game/computer savvy has been limited to the Commodore 64, the Atari 2600/7800/Jaguar, and the Amiga. Adam has recently arranged it, however, so that I have a much wider silicon scene from which to write for this poppy publication. Sip that cider and cuddle up with a nifty little seasonal story:

I came in from my cold walk home from work at about 1 in the morning, and I unlocked the front door of the house in which I board a room. I approached the door to my room, and found a mound of presents. I noticed an envelope on the topmost: **Chris**. So my thoughts immediately changed from "What jerk stored his boxes near my door?" to "Presents? For **me**?"

I excitedly carried them all into my room, and before I opened them, I opened the envelope. I had no idea who in the world would just pop over and leave presents for me. The letter inside basically implied, "So, do ya still hate Christmas, ya jerk?"

Signed: "Your friend, Adam."

Inside the boxes: A ColecoVision (complete with controllers, power, etc.), ten cartridges including the super-rare *War Room*, an Atari 65XE (also with the vitals), twenty-one (count 'em) Atari 8-bit cartridges, two 1050 disk drives plus serial cables, an Atari trak-ball (and of course *Centipede* and *Missile Command* to take advantage of

this desireable device), a Roklan Un-Roller Controller, numerous books about programming Atari 8-bits (including *Compute!*'s great volumes), and a binder full of classic 8-bit game manuals and old Atari mags.

To give you an idea of the degree to which Adam is a collector: These were all **doubles**. (Yup, even the trak-ball!) He'd also gone to the trouble of testing and cleaning every single item.

This is obviously the best Christmas present (collectively) I've ever received. Could you imagine getting all that stuff as a kid in 1983 (substituting the 65XE with the 400 or 800, of course)? I would have obviously been even more thrilled than I was when I received 2600 carts as gifts back then. Adam made me feel like an 11-year-old again, and I thank him for it. I mean, my **mom** wouldn't be able to do that.

So now I'll be able to write about the hobby you share with Adam and I with a much broader base to stand on. And I'm skipping work for a week to use all this stuff.

11-year-olds don't have to go to work, you see.

-- CF

I sure wish I could find where I misplaced my ColecoVision, my Atari 65XE and half of my Atari books and cartridges! I've been pulling my hair out for...hey! Wait a minute!

The truth of the matter is that I enjoyed gathering the above-mentioned gifts as much

as Chris liked receiving them. What is the point of this big collection of mine if I have no one to share it with? Sure, I can play with my three-year-old son (who, sadly, is better at some games than I am). I can force my wife to look at some of my finds (she never plays them!) or I could play these classics with someone who enjoys them as much as I do. Who else but Chris!

The presents were as much a gift to him as they were to myself. In the end it turns out that I have a secret agenda. Indeed, I have a great plan in mind that only **starts** with Chris. He is the first to have been sucked into my scheming claws. It only began with a few innocent presents to a friend. Soon, though, I will expand my territory to include my neighbor's homes, then the block, the town, the state, and eventually the nation. I may stop there, but if all goes to according to my grand scheme, by Christmas 2084, everyone in Europe will be opening my gifts as well!

I know, I know; you're thinking, "What if some cultures don't celebrate Christmas?". I've thought of that, too! There are other days on which to give presents: birthdays, Fathers' Day, Mothers' Day, and so many others -- including the often overlooked Teachers' Day and April Fools' day!

Until every home has an orphaned system, I will sit back and write for this newsletter, careful to never reveal my plans. Oops.

-- AT

This issue of OC&GS may be downloaded, in PDF or text format, from:
<http://w3.tvi.cc.nm.us/~atrionfo>

The classified section is still coming. We haven't received any ads at the time this issue is in its final touch-up stages, so we'd like to remind everyone again to send in your ads for our upcoming classified section. As always, submittal is free. This is an excellent forum for finding things you can't buy at the store anymore! Send your classifieds to the address below.

**ORPHANED COMPUTERS &
GAME SYSTEMS**

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Give this to your friends! Spread the word! We appreciate your help!

If you would like to exchange your 'zine or newsletter, send it! We'll send the next OC&GS!

If you received this issue free, think about sending a buck for the next one. Suggestions are always welcome. What subjects would you like covered?

THE OC&GS FORUM

LETTERS AND MAYBE SOME REPLIES

The amount of mail that's been pouring in is amazing. It seemed that as soon as the first issue of Vol. II was sent out, we started getting a lot of reader feedback. The mailbag is full, folks! Here are just a few samples. Thanks, and keep 'em coming!

YOU, ADAM TRIONFO, MAY
HAVE ALREADY WON
\$10,000,000!!!!

Simply affix your Gold Prize Seal to the inner envelope, and write your Super-Duper Prize-Winner ID Number in the blank. If your name is one of those pulled from Ed's hat, the next Grand-Prize Winner will be Mrs. Trionfo from Albuquerque !!!

Public Service Company
of New Mexico

Item	Cost
-----	-----
Electricity, 31 days	\$35.47

YOU are an ORIGANOL SINNER, and you must REPENT or burn in the FURNASS OF HELL forEVER. Send five dollars to the adress below, and then make ten copsy of this letter and send them to all you're friends. If you do not follow these instructions, you will BURN ETERNALY! If you don't have the cash, then fruitcake is OK.

[Address omitted by editors.]

Dear Mr. Federico,

We are sorry to inform you that we cannot process your order, as we are all out of Item #42 ("Ms. Pinky -- For Guys With All Thumbs"). Please choose another item from the catalogue. If you wish, we will send a full refund.

We regret any inconveniece.
Sincerely,
The Adult Doll Liquidation
Warehouse
"Our customers are special"

Beef patties only \$3.95
per package

Egg nog \$1.29 per gallon

Women's razors just
\$.99 per package

ENJOY THESE AND OTHER
WINTER SAVINGS
AT NELSON'S FOOD-O-
RAMA AND DELI !!!!!
Please bring this coupon for the razors.

Dear OC&GS,

My mom says that video games make kids violent. I think she's full of shit. What do you guys think? By the way, I think you should put boxes around every other letter if you ever have a letters page, because your newsletter would look more professional.

From Jimmy Casey
Age 12

Dear Jimmy,

Well, we're pleased to say that you made a very good point. Your mom is, indeed, full of shit.

GRAPHICS VS. GAME PLAY

What's Happened to Games, Anyway?

by your fearless and
scrutinizing editors

Underground movements get started on the fringes by those who aren't concerned with maintaining the status quo...the console market has been specifically designed to safeguard itself against an underground movement.

Next Generation magazine,
December 1997

Article: "Which way to the
underground?"

The most popular video game graphic in the world, obsessed-over and fixated on by the most people at one time, was very simple. In fact, it was simplicity itself. It was a dot. A trail of dots, actually, winding its way around a maze. Seeking these dots was a graphic that spawned the largest mass-merchandising line (to that point) to originate in an electronic game. It was a yellow circle, scarcely more visually arresting than the dots it was consuming. Its one standout was a rapidly opening and closing mouth.

There had already been popular coin-operated arcade games (namely *Breakout*, *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*, in that order), but *Pac-Man* was the first to make other industries acknowledge that video games were genuine competition for the movie, TV and music markets on their own multimillion-dollar grounds. And we all know what happened from there: It all spiraled upward, and now Mario

is on Taco Bell commercials and whatnot. Games are more of a mass entertainment force to be reckoned with than ever.

But what are these games that are selling in the hundreds of thousands, or millions in some cases?

Right. *Breakout*, *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and *Pac-Man* -- bent, twisted, revamped, revisited and done in different perspectives. Throw in *Donkey Kong* and you've got the mainstream inception of the platform genre. The essence of modern game play is buried in the code of the earliest games, and everything afterward, to a great degree, is merely some sort of improvement or twist on the old concepts. But anyone over, say, 21 can clearly remember how gripping *Pac-Man* was to the average entertainment-seeker. It really had nothing to do with the graphics, barring of course the fact that they were accurately tracked and detected by the computer. Old games had a certain charm, and what's more, they were addictive **in and of themselves**. There didn't have to be any gorgeous realism to draw players in, because the raw basis of the average game was effective by itself, irrelevant to decoration.

So nowadays we have this irrelevant need for realism that's keeping the engaging, edge-of-the-seat qualities of yesterday from the average modern bestseller. *Wing Commander*, for instance, looks pretty, but it needs a thousand extras and non-essential pre-game features to come across as being innovative or even entertaining; and the frame-by-frame, simulated 3-D doesn't even come close to throwing the player's synapses into an immediate panic of overdrive that a simple, smiley-faced ball like Evil Otto can in *Berzerk*. Another obvious

example is *Myst*. Folks, a frustrating point-and-click game is still a frustrating point-and-click game if there are pretty pictures involved. Get we get over our cultural fixation with detailed graphics already? Sights are separate from game play. End of story. I'm tempted to quote *Next Generation's* one-word review title for *Myst*: "Missed."

And yet the thing sells. And sells. Promotion has won out over quality, paralleling the music industry. Maybe it was just a matter of time.

And what about all these Ninja fighting games? Does it matter how the screen LOOKS if it's the same game rehashed over and over and over? If this seems like an article written by two old retrofarts who are buried in the past, consider the immediate, addictive quality offered by the simplicity of *Defender*, *Elevator Action* or *Gauntlet*. Here's the question: Where is that instant, gripping quality these days? Where's the simplistic charm that makes a game unique within its basic idea, without any hood ornaments required? Well, to me, it seems lost in the decorations of rehashed fighting, driving and platform games that offer no innovative elements and yet succeed in fooling video game consumers that visual detail adequately compensates for a lack of raw entertainment.

One of the very rare exceptions, *Doom*, could have been a step in the direction of **combining** (what an idea!) modern graphic beauty with consistently high playing quality. But it stopped there, and we've seen nothing afterward that looks even nearly as encouraging. Home programmers, where are you?

-- CF

I have this fear that I have told Chris about, and it is what

originally inspired this article. I don't have any of the newest game systems, such as the N64, Playstation or Saturn. This doesn't mean that I haven't played these new systems. I have. But they scare me a little. I have a huge collection of video games, ranging back twenty-five years to the first Odyssey. Could you imagine what would happen if I got addicted to a new video game on a new console? Would I leave the classics behind? It is a fear, but like most fears, I know that it is unfounded.

What catches a person's eye while he's playing a game? The answer is, of course, the graphics. But what keeps a person going back for more? The graphics are far from the reason -- perhaps the least of all reasons! The question that bothers me the most is, would I play a quality game that had poor graphics? Would I give it the chance it might deserve? I hope I would say something like, "While this game has graphics on par with a horse's ass, the game itself is wonderful." I actually don't know if I could bear having those words leave my mouth. I do think that graphics are *somewhat* important!

When we talk about graphics, we may as well be talking about the speed of a machine, because they are very closely related. I am ultimately defending game play over graphics, because graphic capability relies on the speed of the machine in question, which is not a necessary (or fair) thing to attack if a game's well-done and fun to play.

There are several standby games that I like to use as frequent examples, and I'm going to admit what they are right now. They are *Tetris*, *Doom* and *Combat*. I obviously use others, but I come back to these time and time again. They are constants, and I use them because so many

people have played them. There may be better, more obscure examples, but if the reader has not played a game that I might refer to, he will probably not understand what I am talking about. So, dear readers, shall we enter a maze of oddly-angled rooms, all alike?

The most basic, simple graphic feature of a computer is the text display. Despite this, many of the early games utilized this display. I'm not talking about text adventures; nor am I speaking of the rather limited game play of ASCII-character games. The average early 8-bit computer used a screen display of about 40x25 text characters. This meant that the computer was keeping track of 1000 objects, each with a width of about 8 pixels by a length of 10 or so. It did vary a little from computer to computer, but what didn't vary was the lack of memory: 64K machines were considered a luxury. So to conserve memory and speed, most games demanded the usage of a redefined character set. The programmer could redraw the machine's understanding of the letter "A," for example, to look like a little bomb. When moved to RAM, the graphics set that used to be the alphabet took up far less room (and time) than making the computer keep track of thousands of individual pixels on the screen. Also, it wasn't necessary to relocate the complete character set. You could move what you wanted.

The above is a typical example of a way to get around limited resources. *This* is impressive, not the relatively easy dumping of digitized pictures into a game. Some good-looking computer games were even created for machines that actually had no true graphic capabilities. But if a machine could have a redefined character

set (and most did), it could have games created for it.

Of course, as with any canvas, it took someone talented to create something that was magical. Painting 1/1000 of the screen at a time (redrawing each built-in character) was tedious, but wonderful games were created that way. A great example of a game that used a redefined character set was AtariSoft's 400/800 version of *Pac-Man*. It looked as close to the arcade version as possible, and it holds up fine today as well, unlike the VCS version, which has definitely *not* improved with age.

(You might notice that while I have general favorites, I also have least-favorites that I refer to just as often. The 2600 version of *Pac-Man* tops the list for my most-used example of inferior game design. And hasn't everyone seen *that*, too?)

Thus far I have not spoken of game play. When you play a quality game, there is no reason to *think* of game play or mechanics. It all works naturally. It isn't until you play a bad game that you see just how difficult it is to have a well-balanced contest.

One example of great play mechanics is *The Legend of Zelda* on the NES. That game plays so naturally that the controller becomes an extended part of you. The switching between screens happens quickly and effortlessly. It does not affect the flow of the game in any way -- so the player has no reason to think about the computer switching the view. Wonderful; a true beauty.

I know that games based on movies are almost always terrible, but there is one particular title that is clear in my mind as just worthless. It is *Days of Thunder* (for the NES as well). There is nothing to do. As a rule,

I find driving games boring, but most of them are at least playable. This one is not. This game has no saving grace. It talks, though. I guess they thought that would be enough to hide the poor quality. (I need not mention that the colors used in the game make me want to gag: a pukey green-and-yellow combination that looks more at home in something like Chris's antithesis of fun, *Frogs and Flies*.)

Once, the creation of a game was left to one person. This one person was responsible for every aspect: graphics, sound, game play, coding, everything! Some guys taught themselves a language and started working on a game at home, not yet sure if a company would even want to eventually publish it (a good example is Bill Hogue, who created *Miner 2049'er*). Others went to school and applied what they learned to newer computer technology, writing games for companies who hired them based on their past work (like most of the Activision team). Yet, despite such diversity, so many quality games were released in the late seventies and early eighties. Now nearly all games are created using teams. You have different people who draw, animate, code, or speak. You have people who even just direct the game, much like a person does a movie. This has advantages as well as despicable side effects.

One person has one vision for a game. It can give a game the focus that is needed to make it perfect. While a team is able to give advice to and support one another, their committee-like compromises may also muddle any focus that the game might need. They also might tumble the play mechanics, and the appropriate degree of simplicity leaves the game.

The current crop of games all look wonderful. This can always be said. With each passing year, games always seem to look more spectacular. It isn't as if the graphic artists are going to forget how to draw. They will use the hardware of new computers as well as they can, as will the programmers. Every year could easily be considered the year that has the best-looking games "so far." Also, with the passage of time, game play mechanics get more in-depth and complex. But the question -- at least the question being addressed here -- is: Does all of this necessarily make for a better game? The answer to that is simply "no."

But I can't get off that easily, can I? Hardly anyone is going to take "no" for an answer. I need something to back up that statement, some proof that great graphics don't necessarily make for great game play. For that, there is a simple answer as well. People had fun playing video games years ago; the fun didn't just recently start with the advent of visual realism. Those games had the best graphics and game play at the time, just as games do now. Those games were fun. I had fun playing them, and millions of others did, too. That is all the proof I need. -- AT

Hey readers!
Remember *Demon Stalkers* on the C-64? Do you still love it? Still play it, even? Would you be interested in receiving 99 brand-new levels? I've created an entire module, called *A Lullaby For Restless Souls*. Send me a buck and I'll send you 2 floppies (one backup). The address: pg. 2.

Do you write programs?
Because we'd love to see them -- even mention them in the mag. Send disks!

Do you have a short trick, program or routine -- for ANY computer -- that you'd like to share? We'd love to receive program-ettes that we could print. Send disks or printouts so we can increase your groupie following!!

Do You Like Books About Video Games?

This is the one you're looking for. It's called *Worlds: The Final, Ultimate Classic Video Game History and Strategy Compilation*. It's everything the title implies and more. It's a work-in-progress, however; I've completed the introductory chapter and seven game chapters (covering one classic game apiece -- I've hit all the essential, coin-op derived contests so far). It's currently up to about 100 pages. It's the most complete, accurate text ever written about video games.

The thing is, it's on disk. This way I don't have to send anyone 100+ printed pages. If you think you'd enjoy it, send \$2 and I'll send you a double-density, 3.5" disk containing the book in ASCII form (which means that you can read it using any computer if it's equipped with a 3.5" drive and a word processing program or some other reading utility).

Many more chapters are obviously coming; these will be free if you bought this first disk. -- CF

From Out of Nowhere

Underground-Spawned
Revolutions in the
Video Game Industry

by Adam Trionfo

There is no way an underground movement can happen in the video game industry without player support. There was never a way to get a large amount of this support without a large amount of cash and publicity. I have always maintained that the first company to be both mainstream *and* underground was Electronic Arts, in the early-to-mid-eighties. They represented the individual creator of each game, giving everyone visible credit. They were the not the first group to thrust the idea into the public eye that game creators are artists; that honor goes to Activision. But EA did it well -- really well.

Electronic Arts and Activision were created as rebellions against the master, the master at that time being Atari. I find it strange that there hasn't been a similar mutiny against Nintendo; they hold a tight grip on the game industry, both when they're the current top company and when they're not. What the gaming community needs is another rebellion.

When I first saw ID Software's *Wolfenstein 3-D* (their precursor to *Doom*), I was impressed. It looked good; I had never seen a game quite like it before. It was also fun, but admittedly not too engrossing to me at the time. ID was an unknown, but they distributed

software using the popularity of the quickly growing Internet -- a brilliant move. The game went on to engross thousands of players of course, and we all know what happened when ID's next 3-D game, *Doom*, came out. The underground became the mainstream, forcing "big" companies to take a new look at game quality and measure their standards against it.

One way a lot of home programmers spread their creations among the computer world and make their individual talents known is through shareware. My first experience with shareware was in 1983. I got a disk from a friend for my Commodore 64. It was full of public domain software, but one of the games asked the player to send eight dollars if he enjoyed it. I didn't send the cash, and I wondered if there was anyone who actually might.

I couldn't believe that this person was asking for money for a game that I thought was worthless. Things sure have changed since then. Some of the best programs available are shareware (you'll notice the mention of *Megaball* on my top-ten list in the last issue, for instance).

In fact, the entire computer industry has changed an enormous amount since it began. I'm not talking about the hardware or the software in this case, but rather the way in which they're distributed. Software was often sold in bookshops or mom-and-pop-type computer stores. The large computer stores that did exist were for business computers primarily. There were computer games, but the majority at that time were played on game consoles, not personal computers. And there existed an often overlooked type of underground movement -- someone could actually write a game, a utility, or

any piece of software, and send it in with the founded hopes of making some money, getting exposure and placing their work in the homes of thousands. I'm talking about the home computer magazines.

These magazines were spawned from 1970s periodicals about the first 8-bit computers: *Creative Computing*, *Byte* and *Dr. Dobbs's Journal* were just a few. While those magazines were good, around the early 80s they mutated into magazines devoted to business computers. The spaces that they left vacant were filled with many magazines aimed right at the home computer user who bought his toy with only minimal ideas of what to do with it. The home computer magazines were there to help and support. And they did an excellent job of it.

Some of the most popular were *Compute!*, for all home computers, *Compute!'s Gazette* and *Run* for the Commodore 64, and *Analog* and *Antic* for the Atari 8-bits. They were public forums for computer enthusiasts.

We would like to be able to support the kind of people who could have used those magazines these days to show off their programming expertise. In future issues we will be publishing short programs written for the various orphaned computers. Please send in programs that you would like to see published. If you would like to write a tutorial, or have a program you would like to share (for any orphaned platform), let us know.

Tentatively, the first such feature will be a speed comparison between an Atari 8-bit BASIC program and a C program for the IBM. I have been told that the Atari BASIC program is as fast as a 486! Both programs will be published here soon.

-- AT

The Legend of Pitfall Harry

FROM THE VCS TO THE PC

by Adam Trionfo and
Chris Federico

There are a number of classic games that have been remade in some form or another over the years, but none really originated on the 2600. That system, unlike the Nintendo (Mario) and the Sega (Sonic), never really had a mascot. The closest one on the 2600 wasn't even made by Atari, but by Activision. That technically makes it Activision's mascot. It was certainly a worthy one. Pitfall Harry is one of the most widely remembered video game characters of all time. He hasn't appeared in many games, but all of those that he has paraded around have been quite good.

The games that we are going to discuss in this article are *Pitfall!*, *Pitfall II: The Lost Caverns*, and *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure*. These games were released for many systems, but we're mainly referring to the versions on the Atari 2600 and the Atari Jaguar. You will notice that we mention other systems -- the C-64 for instance -- but those were not the platforms that gained all the support for our hero Harry. (Keep in mind that the PC *Mayan Adventure* is pretty much the same game as the Jag version.)

Pitfall! became extremely popular in 1982 and '83, selling more than every 2600 cartridge except *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and *Pac-Man*, and one of the reasons was its liveliness. Never before had 2600 graphics been so good, first of all; secondly, Pitfall Harry swung across vines to spiffy fanfares, comically fell

into quicksand with spooky musical accompaniment, and grabbed treasures with victorious trumpeting. He could do more than any other VCS character: climb ladders, dodge barrels, jump snakes, hurdle fire, evade scorpions, sprint across open ground before a fatal little pond suddenly formed, leap from alligator head to head while trying not to fall into their hungry jaws, and (of course) swing across vines. The sheer number of elements made the game revolutionary.

Basically, Harry runs across a jungle, seeking treasures by overcoming obstacles that, although repeated, appear in every conceivable combination to keep new screens as fresh as possible. It really is a game of distance-covering more than anything else.

Pitfall II can be **won**, and it isn't timed like the first game. In fact, Harry can't even die. It's a neat idea: Harry touches the occasionally encountered red cross, which is the spot he returns to if he succumbs to one of the many obstacles in the multi-scaped Lost Caverns. The game does everything a sequel should do: It updates the goal (you have to hunt far and wide for certain items to win, and they're scattered from end to far end of the huge world in the game) and adds a whole new dimension -- not only do screens change when exited through their left or right sides, like in the original, but the game scrolls vertically, making it much, much larger and more free-feeling than the original. Bats, condors, poisonous frogs and electric eels are added, and Harry's new talents include swimming in rivers, jumping off waterfalls and floating on a startlingly weight-ignorant helium balloon. The addition of a multi-part theme song couldn't have hurt the game's appeal of

unprecedented innovation. The 8-bit versions, especially the Commodore 64 one, make the game look absolutely extravagant.

The first game and *Pitfall II* feel very free, enabling the player to roam wherever he pleases and basically choose his route. Even in the strictly horizontal world of the original, Harry can run above or below ground, not really having to watch his step until actually engaging one of the obstacles. So here we come to the downside of the highly detailed, more realistic graphics of the latest episode: In order to keep the intricate images from being mere background filler, the game designers incorporated the rocks, ledges and whatnot into the player's necessary route, making them the brunt of the game play instead of merely encountered obstacles. It detracts from the thrill of the search; brainwork, like the route-planning in *Pitfall II*, isn't quite obsolete in the *Mayan Adventure*, but it's much less of a necessity than in the first two games. The path is very linear, getting more and more dictated as the levels go by, and the pixel-by-pixel detection of Harry's every step often makes it frustrating. So the *Mayan Adventure* isn't quite an improvement on the old group of elements; it's basically just another platform game, albeit one of the finest.

One of the reasons it's one of the best is that, again, it looks great graphically. The aspects of the *Pitfall* world have not changed much, either, and the way in which they're redrawn in high detail makes the graphics seem that much more innovative. Released in 1994 for the Super Nintendo and Genesis, it did okay. If this game had been released when the *Pitfall* name was much more familiar, the *Mayan Adventure* would have

done better commercially. Nonetheless, this latest installment has translated well into modernity. Another of its strengths is that many secret areas and bonuses can be discovered with a little exploratory work, a'la *Super Mario Bros. 3* and *Doom*.

The game can't really be considered another Harry adventure, as Harry is kidnapped in the introduction to the game. Instead we play the part of, surprisingly enough, Harry Jr. He could have been named Joe Bob and it probably would not have made any difference in the game. It easily could have been construed as a whole new concept, so they had to tie *Pitfall* in somehow (just in case the alligators, scorpions, pits, vines and built-in 2600 version, in its entirety, didn't make it obvious!).

Your courageous authors have beat *Pitfall II* and *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure*, but never the original. As far as we can discern, there is no true ending to that first game. It is not a game to "complete," unless you consider scoring all possible points in the allotted 20:00 a conquest of sorts (or visiting all 255 screens within that time; is that even possible? We've heard that it is).

Another thing that the *Mayan Adventure* contains is that age-old platform game element, the big bad guy at the end of each level. As the first two games weren't separated into levels, such challenges weren't necessary. But it would have been nice if *Mayan's* end-of-level obstacles necessitated more brainwork and less ho-hum jumping and striking. One of *Pitfall II's* strengths is that it requires strategic planning. Perhaps there could have been object manipulation puzzles at the end of each *Mayan* level, or better-hidden exits that one had

to locate.

It makes sense from a standpoint of marketability (boo hiss) that Activision would choose to make the *Pitfall* world's long-awaited revisitation a platform contest. With that defense out of the way, we can conclude that the designers of the *Mayan Adventure* did a nearly optimum job. The game looks beautiful, and old elements were incorporated in unique ways. *Pitfall* Harry's search for treasure and his penchant for hopping across alligator heads or dodging swooping bats persists in Harry Jr., and the ending couldn't be funnier or more perfect (we won't spoil it!).

Just out of curiosity, why didn't Harry Sr. at least have his *son* taught how to swim? Seems it would have made the family business much easier. OC&GS

A Brief Wish For Relevance

The Internet has the potential to create a community that we can all learn from. I have yet to find an example of a good way in which this ability has been put to use, though.

I would like to see programming examples and tutorials for various platforms on a web page.

If you know of a site on the Internet that does this for any orphaned platform, let me know!

-- AT

I mentioned last issue that I would go over the last five games on my top-ten list in this issue, but it seems that we've wound up with enough material to fill this issue. So next time, we'll get back to the games that I didn't go into detail about.

We haven't received any readers' top tens as this issue goes to press (okay, goes to the printer), so hopefully we'll get them before next ish and print them at that time. Remember to send 'em if you haven't! -- AT

OC&GS PRESENTS NIFTY LITTLE FACTS

Did you know that the most popular non-Atari ("third-party") companies that released 2600 games were made up of programmers who originally worked for Atari? For various reasons -- not being given individual credit for their games, being underpaid, and other valid last straws -- several enterprising programmers left Atari in the late 70s and early 80s and formed their own companies to release higher-quality games for the VCS.

In 1979, four Atari 2600 game designers -- David Crane, Alan Miller, Bob Whitehead and Larry Kaplan -- quit their jobs at Atari and formed Activision.

Bill Grubb and Dennis Koble were also dissatisfied with their jobs at Atari, and formed Imagic in 1981. One of Dennis's first projects for the new company was *Atlantis*. Imagic soon recruited Rob Fulop, who had designed *Night Driver* and *Missile Command* for the 2600; games he went on to design for Imagic included *Demon Attack*, *Cosmic Ark* and *Fathom*.

THE OC&GS REVIEW PANEL

To reiterate the idea behind this column: We've often found game reviews, commentaries and perspectives to be terribly one-sided and narrow, so we're both expressing our feelings about certain Atari 2600 games, printed here as separate commentaries. Apply and/or enjoy as you will.

COMMANDO RAID -- Play-testing. Those are two words that U.S. Games didn't have as part of the company vocabulary. If a few minutes had been spent play-testing this game by someone outside the company, or at least by someone *honest*, it would have been a lot better. Just a little time polishing up the details is all it would have taken.

The premise: You are some guy with a BIG gun at the bottom-center of the screen, shooting at all these baddies that are falling from helicopters onto your towns so that they can tunnel toward you, underground, and blow you up. But (you might not know this) there is a special feature included to make the game more fun. You see, some of these guys, some of these horrible commandos, have special suits that let your bullets pass right through them! I know that this sounds like a bug of some sort, but it isn't! It adds an exciting element to the game that just would have been missing otherwise. (Ahem.)

Yet another powerful feature involves some stray plane from *Air-Sea Battle* flying by and dropping a bomb on you. It's indestructible. You see, this plane is actually a B-2 Bomber using stealth technology to avoid your bullets! Although your shot might *look* like it's hitting the target, it's really missing by a mile! (In fact, the plane is in another country altogether by the time you even see it!)

If this view of the game were accurate, I suppose I would have some great things to say about the programmers at U.S. Games. But, as you may have guessed, this poor reviewer just got frustrated when the collision detection failed nearly all the time. Sometimes bullets pass through one soldier five times. Sorry -- not fair. But since I don't ever plan to play this game again, I don't care all that much! -- AT

COMMANDO RAID -- "Special feature?"

Very funny, Adam. Actually, I agree with you on all counts (which rarely happens, I know). There is nothing more frustrating than playing a game that could have been good, or at least mildly addictive, and then seeing it ruined by a bug or oversight. The graphics are excellent, and the cannon-at-the-bottom concept is actually unique in this case; you don't have to worry about threats to the cannon itself, since it's not harmed by paratroopers (which is a good thing, since you can't move anything except its aim). You just have to protect the cities to either side from men who want to fall on them, because when enough fall on one city, they can get underground and start tunneling toward your gun. This interesting mixture of U.S. Games' own *Gopher* and Atari's classic *Missile Command* could have been good, especially with these graphics and this fluid movement.

But it's NOT a good game. Not at all. You pegged it, Adam; the collision detection routine in the code fails at least half the time. Also, deployment of the paratroopers wasn't well-thought-out; you find yourself flipping the gun to only the extreme angles and shooting at its lowest aim constantly -- probably because you have to shoot a trooper two or three times before the game realizes that he's dead. You can almost hear the ol' 2600 saying "Oh yeah. Sorry."

The gun can't aim very low, adding to this frustrating aspect; by the time you've managed to register a shot, opposing troopers have fallen below your gun's extreme shooting angle.

The bad elements stick out much further than the good ones, reducing a potentially good game to an exercise in frustration that would have been more at home at Apollo than the usually decent U.S. Games. -- CF

DIG-DUG -- While on vacation in the Catskills in the early eighties, I spent my five dollars' worth of daily quarters on this game in a little game room. This wonderful game sat next to *Defender*, which was too difficult for me. My cousin played that, but I wouldn't say that he was much better at it than I was. (Then again, playing *Defender* for an extra thirty seconds is like playing most other games for seven minutes!)

The concept of *Dig-Dug*, like in most past arcade games, was very simple. Dig through the earth and pump up the balloons until they explode. Why were these balloons dangerous? I didn't ask; I was just following orders to get rid of the putrid scum! It was a fairly easy game, which was why I liked it. I could play for quite a while without dying.

A short time after I played the coin-op version of the game on that vacation, I got a Commodore 64. *Dig-Dug* on the 64 was exactly as I remembered the arcade version. But I never played the 2600 version until I began collecting a few years ago.

The 2600 version is also very close to the arcade game -- for the 2600, anyway. (Of course, I haven't played the arcade version for about thirteen years, so forgive me if I am being a bit lenient.) The game is fun, if a bit too easy. It makes good use of color, and the graphics are well-defined. Everything I remember about the arcade version is there. There is nothing I would change about this translation except to perhaps give it a few more difficulty levels.

One last thing. Is there anyone who can explain why the earth has horizontal lines running across it? They look like the lines in *Surround* that appear when you move. You know -- how come it can't just look solid? -- AT

DIG-DUG -- They did a good job of leaving in all of the elements. This was always a feat on the 2600, especially before later programming techniques were developed. So I have no complaints there; if you wanna play *Dig-Dug*, this is definitely *Dig-Dug*.

Tragically, this translation's downfall resides in technical 2600 limitations. I know that that's not a terribly fair thing to attack, but the whole reason that the free-form, create-your-own-maze mechanic of *Dig-Dug* is a lot of fun is that you can turn on a dime and make a new tunnel anywhere you want. In this home version, however, there are bigger non-diggable spots than in any other version; certain huge bits of ground act as permanent medians, often forcing you to move a little farther and THEN start making a tunnel. This often results in death.

Other than this annoying byproduct of low-resolution limitations, it's a good translation, but not one of the best. -- CF

MARIO BROS. -- I can't think of anything actually important to the game that could have been done better in this version. Mario and Luigi look like Mario and Luigi, the other characters look like their coin-op counterparts, and the ice guy even freezes platforms, like in the original. The "pow" box doesn't say "pow," but graphic compromises like this are compensated-for by very minimal, barely noticeable character blinking instead of the usual drastic flickering. The only thing that should have been increased was inertia; one of the fun things about the coin-op version was that you could skid to a stop and bonk under a bad guy as you slid, knocking him off his platform and down onto yours for disposal. Also, you can rarely knock off a dazed baddie protruding off the edge of a platform by jumping from below (another mainstay coin-op strategy), because Mario and Luigi don't have very minute moving capabilities.

But that's it. Other than that, it's one of the better 2600 arcade adaptations. This is completely objective, because I never found the game too thrilling in the first place. It's kinda boring, and that definitely doesn't change in the slightly slower, more limited-movement 2600 version. But I guess that if the usual tricks of knocking enemies off their platforms were retained, it would be too easy. -- CF

MARIO BROS. -- This game is fun, if you play with two people. Playing this game alone has no appeal at all for me. The graphics are some of the best on the 2600, but the play control does not match the coin-op's quite so neatly.

Plug in the second controller and get your brother, your mother, your dog, anyone! This game's replay value is multiplied by ten when you are engaged in "friendly" competition. "Oops! Sorry. I didn't mean to turn the baddie right-side-up just before you got to him. I won't do that next time. I promise!"

One of the biggest drawbacks of this game is that you don't have very precise control on Mario's jump or run/stop. It detracts from the game; but by the time you really notice, your friend has just "accidentally" killed you. Some promise! -- AT

GRAND PRIX -- I know how much Chris likes to annoy me. I know that he might say something good about this game. So I need to make sure that my negative reaction is enough to leave you with a bad impression of *Grand Prix*, no matter what Chris has to say.

Activision might have released crap once in a while, but at least it was good crap. This game has some of the better graphics on the 2600, a nice use of colors, and good joystick control -- everything you'd come to expect from the quality programmers at Activision. But for some reason, the game, much like *Barnstorming*, is like so many of the PC games available nowadays.

I could go into hysterics and name everything I don't like about the game, but I think there's an easier way. I could wrap it all up in one nice statement. Yes indeed, this will get my point across: *Grand Prix* is the Atari 2600 equivalent of *Myst*. So pretty, and yet such garbage. -- AT

GRAND PRIX -- Adam's always talking about how simplification in a game, a minimum amount of elements programmed well and made into an entertaining set of challenges, is a strong point. In fact, he praised about *Surround* (original title: *Lots O'Squares*) last issue.

Let me point out one thing: Neither Adam nor I have ever liked driving games. Having said that, I kinda like this particular driving game. For one thing, you can use the joystick. I'm much more comfortable with a joystick than a paddle. Another thing is that it's a side-view race; it's hardly an actual driving game at all, which is a strong point with me. Driving games are usually boring, but this is a simple, exciting test of reflexes; you could substitute spaceships for the cars and the basic idea would be the same. Using the fire button to speed up and the left joystick direction to apply brakes, you drive your car along a scrolling road, moving up and down to dodge other cars and maneuver over narrow bridges.

The game has the same excitement as *Kaboom!* Once you get going really fast, the immediate, constant test of reflexes throws your synapses into panic. It has that same quality. The graphics are great-looking, their detection is accurate (like in any Activision game), and everything scrolls smoothly and quickly. There's something satisfying about

this one, but for some reason the simplistic qualities have escaped Adam.

I do admit that it's only slightly more complex than, say, *Pong*, and I can't help but wonder why there weren't a few more aspects added to this well-done program. Y'know, like multi-lane bridges to cross, or cars that would try to bump you off the road, and which you could do the same to. Maybe one "shoot the car in front of you" option per race. Stuff like that. Was the code used up because of the detailed graphics? That's never worth it. It ties into the graphics article elsewhere in this issue: Graphics don't mean a thing compared to the actual game play. I would have liked to see this game added-onto a bit; it's a great blueprint, but it *is* really basic. It's really great, but it's kind of a teaser -- "Just think of what we *could* have done with a little more memory...and maybe more time before the deadline!" -- CF

AIRLOCK -- If "I Feel Alright" by Iggy Pop and the Stooges hadn't been playing, screaming that constant assurance into my ear even now, I would have tossed the *Airlock* cartridge across the room. Yeah, Iggy, I feel alright! Stick-man floating across the screen with no actual animation, Iggy! I feel alright! Sure! Some kinda tractor noise for the running sound, Iggy! Hit something blocky to open the airlock, Iggy! I feel alright! He he he he!!!! Get to the top and the game ends, Iggy! I feel... I feel *used!* I feel *used!* Data Age has *used* me! But there *is* a God, and its name is **OUT OF FUCKING BUSINESS!!!!** -- AT

AIRLOCK -- I'm very worried about Adam. I fear that this game has psychologically damaged him. There might not be another issue, folks. I'm looking forward to his recovery, and your sympathy cards would definitely be appreciated, but I'm not sure when he'll be out of the mental hospital. If there *is* a next issue, we'll see you then...

(I certainly hope he never gets hold of *Journey Escape*.) -- CF

SEeya NEXT TIME!